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THE RESTORED HUMANITY OF COMMANDER BURHAN WANI

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On Friday evening, the news of Burhan Wani's killing arrived in my phone with a picture of his dead body. The picture was gruesome, taken from an angle meant to amplify its gruesomeness. Given the way Kashmiri rebels have been depicted in the visual culture of the Indian military occupation, I didn't expect Burhan's killers to show respect for his body. For years, police and military photographers have circulated pictures of dead Kashmiri militants that show them disheveled and bloodied, with torn clothes and limbs out of joint, presenting the figure of the Kashmiri rebel as a wild, hunted felon. The intent has been clear: criminalize their thoughts and bodies, and show them as existing beyond the pale of society and humanity. It is easier to kill that way, easier than what the occupation has already made possible.

But Burhan had created his own visual counterculture. In image after image, and video after video, the young commander was seen not as a figure on the run, but one who seemed to truly enjoy his life among his comrades. In contrast to the violence depicted in the images circulated by the state, and the captions that accompanied them, Burhan's images were tranquil and content. There was never a hint of violence in those images, despite the weapons that always remained in the background—those weapons would appear to be arranged as proud signs of defiance rather than as crude instruments of violence. The dramatic co-existed with the mundane. In one video, he is playing cricket with grenades strapped across his body juggling clangorously. His enthusiastic comrades, with similar gear, are running after the ball. How risky, I thought when I saw it; yet I could not shake the feeling that his *joie de vivre* was infectious. His other pictures, where he is standing, again with weapons, against the backdrop of Kashmir's snowy mountains and verdant hills, seem to express a sense of belonging to

Kashmir as a place as it is popularly imagined. People, who saw those pictures, wished him safety. "*Khuday karnei raechh* (May Khuda protect you)," they would say. If the obscenity of the images circulated by the state repulsed people, Burhan's images evoked a tender affection.

It was not the military logic of 'recruitment' that undergirded Burhan's pictures (as the 'poster boy' theorists would have us believe); neither do I think he intended to create a new visual counterculture of the rebellious Kashmiri youth. The images simply reclaimed the humanity of the 'Kashmiri militant,' and reconnected the idea of the rebel with his people at the visceral level. His images also acquired a symbolic logic over time: To exist as a joyous rebel undermined the entire story the Indian state tells its citizens and Kashmiris. If the "new militancy" was anything, then, it was the emergence of the exuberant new movement driven by spontaneous solidarities, and the collective expression of popular sentiment against the forces of occupation.

Indeed, there might be truth to the claim many sober Indian writers have made that Burhan and his family suffered personal violence, which drove him to pick weapons. Yet, such claims are often accompanied by efforts to present Burhan as an impressionable youngster. If the state had been nice, it is said, Burhan might have become something else—preferably a bureaucrat, an aspirational slot fixed for the 'good Kashmiri' in the Indian nationalist fantasy. Yet, all of this denies Burhan's his political maturity, and his understanding of the Kashmir situation. In his videos, there is a remarkable absence of personal resentment. Nor does he seem to express any anxiety about his imminent death (which, of course, made many in Kashmir worry about him more).

Most analysis of the post-Burhan moment, so far—even the one that claims to counter the cruder aspects of the state propaganda—tends to fall within the acceptable prism of the state discourse. Appeals such as "state be nice," "talk to them," or "exercise calm," despite good intentions, appear too naïve compared to how ordinary Kashmiris see the nature of the Indian rule in Kashmir. The same opinion tends to patronize Kashmiri youth, asks state officials to talk to their parents, and advises youth to protest —if they have to—"as they do at Jantar Mantar."

Kashmiris know the occupation is chronically violent, persistently vindictive, and is going to remain so as long as it exists. The state that denies a people their right to self-determination can be nothing but repressive. How could Burhan not have shared the same understanding of the Indian control over Kashmir? Is it misplaced to think so? And is it then an accident that Burhan became Commander Burhan Wani? Or is it immanent to a condition of injustice that rebels such as Burhan emerge or the methods they choose?

In the history of political struggles, some individuals become indices of their times. They gather the dispersed fragments of the social order and disorder in their words or being, and, as such, come to represent an event in themselves. The figure of Burhan Wani, similarly, represents a new moment in the political history of the Tehreek movement. Maqbool Bhat, it is true, was not so well known until he was executed by the Indian state in 1984. It was a time of elite political intrigue amid a general culture of desperate silence. Bhat became a lightning rod of political clarity against that silence, a shattering rupture in the dominant discourse. Ishfaq Wani, the rebel commander of the 1990 movement, concretized that rupture, embodying the mass rebellion against the order established in 1947. Even Afzal Guru became an index of the Kashmiri otherness in the Indian ethical imagination—an impossibility of justice under the punitive occupation. Burhan Wani gathers in his being this entire political history. But, more importantly, through his images, he brought the rebellion out of the shadows to

which the occupation had successfully driven it. He represents the restored humanity of the Kashmiri rebel, the decriminalization of the idea of Azadi in Kashmir, and, foremost, the idea of joyous rebellion against the repressive domination.

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BURHAN WANI INDIA OCCUPIED KASHMIR KASHMIR

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